

Native American contributions

Did you know? Many of the foods, medicines, games and economic ideas we use today stem from Native American history and culture? A lot of credit is due to the many indigenous people who came up with some of things we take for granted today.

— Quinine, today's modern treatment for malaria, was long used by the Quechua, the indigenous people in Peru, as a muscle relaxant.

— The number zero in mathematics was possibly the invention of the Olmecs, who used it in their calendars, as did the Mayans.

— Native Americans were the first to introduce many types of foods to Europeans, including corn, potatoes, many types of beans, cranberries, tomatoes, chocolate, wild rice, and much more.

— The North American fur trade began as early as the 1530s as a currency system between Native Americans and early European settlers. Indigenous people traded among themselves in what is now Canada and the United States, but it picked up heavily in later centuries after Europeans took advantage of it.

— Canoeing, which we know typically as a recreational activity today, was the primary mode of long-distance transportation through much of North America, the Amazon and other locations with prominent waterways. Lacrosse, also known as a sport today, has its origins in a tribal ball game played by the eastern Woodlands and Plains Indians. It is one of the oldest team sports in North American, having been played as early as the 17th century in Canada.

— Iroquois League of Nations, a confederacy of six Native American tribes, was an inspiration to the American founding fathers as a way to balance federal and state power. Its system of government resembled what became the Articles of Confederation and the U.S. Constitution in how smaller nations can unite under a central government.

— Sign language was a prominent form of communication prior to Columbus' arrival, serving as a common translation technique between tribes.

— The names of many states (not to mention cities and rivers) come from Native American origin: Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Connecticut, Dakota, Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, Ohio, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Wisconsin, and Wyoming.

The history of chocolate can be traced to the Mokaya and pre-Olmec people as far back as 1900 B.C. The Aztecs believed cacao seeds were gifts of the gods, and many Native American people used them for frothy drinks long before it became popular.

Although Egyptians are best known for mummification, the Chinchorro people in present-day Chile and Peru are among the earliest cultures to perform mummification. Chinchorro mummies have been dated around 7020 B.C., (but more commonly 5000-3000B.C.) compared to Egyptian mummies, the oldest of which are dated around 3000 B.C. At the time, many indigenous nations revered the dead, but the Chinchorro people were far more dedicated to preservation.